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One-to-One Leadership:

Coaching in schools

What are the conditions that need to be present for a coaching leadership style to make an impact?

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One-to-one leadership: coaching in schools

Coaching is central to current thinking about leadership. Involvement in the Leadership Programme for Serving Headteachers has highlighted many headteachers' coaching abilities. To what extent are these skills consciously developed and used in schools and what are the conditions that need to be present for this leadership style to make an impact?

Introduction

This study draws on interviews with 10 primary headteachers who have identified that they regularly use a coaching style of leadership and shows how heads have made coaching work for their schools. The report specifically examines how and with what effect headteachers take it on themselves to act as coach to their colleagues in schools and to facilitate a coaching approach generally within the school. The study aims to answer three key questions:

- What does coaching in schools look like?
- How is a coaching approach to professional development used by heads?
- What factors affect its likely success as a leadership tool?

Main findings

“Coaching fits in brilliantly with what we want to do and where we want to go. I want something that supports people and gives them the chance to improve themselves. Something to build us up. If I get it right, I can use coaching to give these things focus.”

The headteachers I interviewed had a strong tendency to act as coaches in their own schools, usually with a good deal of success. This success is often achieved despite an ad hoc process but if coaching is to have maximum impact as a potent tool for transforming schools, schools need to take a more strategic and systematic view.

The greatest impact seems likely to arise when school leaders:

- invest in the ecology of their school: ensure the growing conditions are right for effective coaching partnerships to flourish
- have developed a clear view of their competencies as coaches and added specific coaching skills to their professional armoury
- have engendered trust and responsibility in the people being coached
- are clear about the intended results and focus of coaching partnerships
- use coaching as a tool in the transformation process, aligned to the overall aims and values of the school

What does coaching look like in schools?

“Some of the most successful work I’ve been involved in here has come from focused conversations with staff. Sometimes a conversation can move them on and move you on as well.”

Finding a single satisfactory definition of coaching is a challenge in itself. The proliferation of literature around the subject confuses as much as it enlightens. However, headteachers in the sample articulated a view that coaching seemed to have a number of generic features including:

- a focus on learning
- a results orientation
- the development of skills, competencies and attitude

All the heads I spoke to identified times when they acted as coach. Only one told me that she used the style deliberately and consciously, although another did plan to weave coaching into a school improvement strategy. It does seem that coaching is a style that heads fall into. It appears to be used in conjunction with more familiar leadership behaviours rather than as a systematically designed process.

All leaders I spoke with who had used coaching as a lever for improvement were positive about their experiences. They all reported performance gains as a direct result of their one-to-one leadership of colleagues.

Making coaching work

“When I came here I was clear about who I was and what I stood for. It took about three years for my values to be the school’s values... This happened by talking and listening and taking every opportunity to discuss ideas.”

“I think I’m a good listener. I like to listen to what people have to say so I can give value to them and encourage them.”

Despite the absence of a conscious, planned and systematic process, most headteachers I spoke to were positive about their coaching experiences and were making it work. Conversations with leaders reveal a number of factors that appear to be of some importance in determining the success of coaching as a leadership endeavour. These are listed below.

A positive school climate

- Shared values between coach and learner: this appeared to be most powerful when the values were explicitly communicated and when the values were consensual between partners
- A common understanding of the direction of the school
- A common language of learning between partners
- Very clear and well understood operational guidelines for the school in general and for the coaching partnership in particular
- An openness to discussions about performance
- Visible and accessible leadership that was well established in headship

An effective coach

- Coaching from a position of professional strength
- Self-awareness
- Appreciation of colleagues’ strengths, weaknesses and learning needs

It is notable that none of the colleagues I spoke to had received any formal training in using coaching as a leadership style.

A responsive learner

- A relationship based on trust and a genuine desire for improvement
- An acceptance of the responsibilities of both partners in the coaching process

A clear task focus

- Clear success criteria were sometimes agreed early on in the coaching partnership.
- There was a significant level of alignment between the task in hand and the objectives of the school as a whole, or the learner’s goals.
- Headteachers used a number of existing platforms as the basis of their coaching including:
 - ☐ performance management
 - ☐ giving feedback following lesson observations and scrutiny of pupils’ work
 - ☐ career development
 - ☐ leadership and management development

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